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Christianity & War

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Christianity and War

*An ADDRESS by the RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS,
1900.*

WE believe it right, at the present time, to give fresh expression to our testimony to the peaceable nature of Christ's Kingdom, and the unlawfulness of war to the Christian; in the hope of strengthening the witness borne by our own members, and of encouraging others, within and without the organized churches of this and other lands, who hold a like faith with ourselves upon the subject.

In preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom, our Lord proclaimed a new order of life,—the inward rule of the Father in the hearts of His children,—binding men together in a brotherhood of mutual service, leavening humanity secretly as it possessed one soul after another, capable, like the mustard-seed, of almost infinite growth, yet coexisting for a time with the old order, like the wheat among the tares. The whole spirit of Christ's life and teaching* exem-

* Read and consider: Matt. v.-vii., Matt. iv. 8-10; Luke ix. 51-56; Matt. xxvi. 52, 53; John xviii. 36; Mark xv. 29-32. Compare: Eph. vi. 10-18.

plifies the peaceable nature of His Kingdom, and shows that in its service the weapons of worldly passion are to be renounced; and the love and self-sacrifice, of which He is the sovereign example, are to take their place. Rejecting all violent subversion of evil institutions, Christ brought into the world a spiritual life which transforms humanity by regenerating its inner spirit. This transforming power in Christian civilization* has, amongst its other triumphs, already greatly contributed to the overthrow of many evil institutions closely allied with war; the gladiatorial games which were the passion of the Roman world; the institutions of ancient slavery, mediæval serfdom, and negro slavery; private war, that terrible scourge of the middle ages; and, in many countries, the practice of duelling. "After all," as Lord Salisbury has said,† "the great triumph of civilization in the past has been in the substitution of judicial determination for the cold, cruel, crude arbitrament of war." Warlike institutions must die away as brotherhood and justice grow. War is not a falling short of the moral ideal in a few points only: it tramples upon the moral law as a whole, and even sets human law at defiance. It is, therefore, so glaring an anachronism that a relatively small increase of enlightenment

* For a general sketch of the influence of Christian civilization, see Lecky, 'History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne,' vol. ii.

† Speech at Brighton, May 19th, 1892.

r its abolition. The growth of
 the increasing practice of Arbitra-
 setting-up of a permanent tribunal, as
 the Hague Conference, show the hold
 ing over the life of nations. And
 ement of this law the sanction of
 nion of civilization has been found
 stice is a potent "miracle-worker"
 , *

then, that the spirit of Christ will
 eem national as well as individual life.
 ther that, as all church history shows
 ans will be the faithful witness borne
 isciples. It has been well said, "It
 the will of Him, who is infinite in
 light upon great subjects should first
 gradually spread, through the faith-
 dividuals in acting up to their own
 t This was the secret of the power
 Church. The blood of the Christians
 ful seed.‡ In like manner the staunch-
 Friends and others to their con-

Christians to-day. Throughout all the relations of private and public life the Christian is bound, as a paramount duty, to faithful allegiance to the Kingdom of God and the divine will which is its law, and thus only can discharge aright his duties to family, country, and humanity. The opening words of the Lord's Prayer are not devotional aspirations merely, but a threefold vow to this supreme service: "Our Father which art in heaven; Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth."*

So long as the Christian conscience sleeps, we cannot expect its ideals to find adequate expression in national policy. The Church of Christ is unfaithful to her trust if she does not confront the world with the teaching of her Master. She is not to rest content with registering the current conception of national righteousness: it is her place to give moral leadership to the nation (as was nobly done at the time of the Venezuelan difficulty), and to silence with her clear voice the popular clamour of passion and hate.

Other causes, however, besides unfaithfulness, deter many from bearing steadfast witness. The sanction given to war in the Old Testament is often regarded as sufficient warrant for its being waged at the end of nineteen centuries of Christian enlightenment. But the Old Testament is the record

* Matt. vi. 9, 10.



of a progressive revelation, conditioned at each stage by human capacity to receive and realize it. It is the biography of a people whose spiritual horizons continually enlarged, until inspired prophets could foresee a day when "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more,"* and could understand that the world's redemption would be wrought by the suffering Servant of the Most High.† The Sermon on the Mount shows that our Lord Himself regarded the moral laws of the Old Testament as rudimentary, to be extended in scope and deepened in character by His own fuller teaching. Men of faith, living in the dawn of revelation, reached out after God, even amid the institutions of polygamy and slavery and blood-revenge. We, in like manner, are to be faithful to the guidance of the noontide light, shed on us in the face of Jesus Christ.

Again, the maxim of unchristian statecraft, "the end justifies the means," is often allowed to override the witness against war. We think of the goal, and forget the nameless atrocities by which it is sought. A clearer vision would show us that, in spite of the self-sacrifice, inspired by devotion to one's country, which shines on the battle-field, the actual operations of warfare show that it is essentially a "soul-blinding, heart-blurring business,"‡

* Isa. ii. 4.; Micah iv. 3. † Isa. lii. 13–liii. 12.

‡ Archibald Forbes.

vitiating the moral atmosphere, callous to the divine worth of human life, its iron discipline trampling on the will and conscience of the soldier, its bloodshed begetting on the one hand hatred and revenge, and on the other the insolent pride of conquest, its stricken field a seed-plot for future strife ;

“For what can war, but endless war still breed ? ” *

Surely such aid must desecrate the holiest cause. Christ’s words, in rejecting the like temptation, should be ours. “Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve.” †

“To further Heaven’s ends we dare not break
Heaven’s laws.”

But the difficulty which is perhaps most often felt arises from the fact that, since even the most advanced nations are as yet only imperfectly Christian, their conduct is governed by mixed motives, and not by the pure spirit of Christ. Acquiescence in the action of the nation, whether right or wrong, is commonly regarded as the only patriotism. But devotion to the highest interests of our country and loyalty to truth alike require that we “obey God rather than men,” ‡ and, in the meekness and gentleness of Christ, bear witness against wrong at the cost of unpopularity and even suffering. The lover of his country is jealous of her honour in the court

* Milton, ‘Sonnet to the Lord General Fairfax.’

† Matt. iv. 8-10. ‡ Acts. v. 29.

of conscience of mankind, careful of all the finer elements of her character, deeply concerned to maintain that moral vigour which is the life of national greatness ; for he knows that—

“ By the soul
Only, the nations shall be great and free.”*

The question is often asked, “How would England fare if she abandoned her reliance on armed force?” We answer that, as the change we have foreshadowed takes place, she will grow into a larger and nobler spirit than the England of to-day. The energy, the self-sacrifice, and heroism which now sport their God-given strength in the service of death will be animating an era of fuller brotherhood. As man advances, the moral forces of righteousness and goodwill become more and more the basis of power. They have given our country her moral influence in the world, and are the true foundation on which her empire now rests. It is difficult to set limits to the strength she would possess if her national character and policy became fully Christian. But, if sacrifice and loss were her portion, her service to the Kingdom of God might even become the greater for her suffering.

The progressive deterioration of character which in fact accompanies war verifies the urgent need of fostering the spirit of national righteousness, which,

* Wordsworth, “Dover on the day of landing.”

as it extends, will give our statesmen the necessary mandate for a Christian policy of peace, with its consequent effect upon armaments.

In bearing witness to peace we may find some questions hard to determine, as is the case also in carrying out other duties, such as truth-speaking and self-sacrifice. Many of these will be resolved as we endeavour with singleness of heart to know and to do our own personal duty. They should not, in any case, draw us away from faithfulness to the far larger parts of the question, where the light is clear.

Nor should our convictions lead us to think lightly of the loyalty to what they believe to be their country's service which ennobles the lives of many soldiers. It is not the soldier's heroism, but the work in which he is engaged, that we believe to be repugnant to the teaching and life of Christ.

Our position with respect to peace cannot be isolated without loss from the rest of our faith. The all-loving character of God, who makes His sun to rise on the evil as well as upon the good, not only furnishes the basis of our Lord's command to "love our enemies" * that so we may "become" † children of God, but should dominate and regenerate the whole spirit of life. We shall seek to live "in the virtue of that life and power that takes away the

* Matt. v. 43-45. † Luke vi. 35.

e to get and to keep what we have. We shall not condemn increase in the lust of dominion which we have, or denounce war while we are at it. We shall see the fatal weakness of our words the growing militarism which we are supporting the spirit of our age. Our witness to the Brotherhood of Manhood, which was revealed through the Incarnation, will be in all our other fields; we shall endeavour to do that which would deface manhood or which would lead to industrial conflict or the keen warfare of competition, and shall seek to ameliorate the conditions which impede the full development of life. We shall understand what Scott says,† that "in the light of the true interests of nations, the interest of one nation is the loss of all; the interest of one is the gain of all; the di-

is above all a calamity to the conquerors. . . .
The nations have one common life, one common
end."

Our witness is not narrow and negative, but far-reaching in its scope, and intensely positive in the active service for Christ's peaceable Kingdom to which it calls us. Seeing the issues of life and death in the clear light of the Spirit, we become impressed with the sacred worth of humanity in the sight of God. Man is a being full of divine possibilities, visited by the Holy Spirit, the object of Christ's redeeming love, called to the high destiny of sonship to God. Face to face with these great truths, the Christian will surely shrink with horror from the wholesale slaughter of the battlefield. He is called to a holier warfare to be waged with other weapons, to a higher service for God and for humanity: to him is committed the ministry, the blessed "ministry of reconciliation." *

Signed in and on behalf of the Yearly Meeting,

JOHN MORLAND,

Clerk.

12, Bishopsgate Without, London.

Sixth Month, 1900.

* 2 Cor. v. 18-20.

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